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III

TWO TALISMANS

Managing Editor MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL:

In *Colomba* Miss Nevil gives Orso a scarab ring with the purpose of steeling him against the evil passions of his native land. She explains the hieroglyphics on the ring as signifying "la vie est une bataille." I have pointed out (*Modern Language Notes*, May 1918), that Mérimée refers to a similar Egyptian motto in his *Lettres à une Inconnue* (Vol. I, P. 8) and describes the symbols. The motto was surely a favorite one of Mérimée's. Miss Lydia's action is so natural as to leave no doubt as to its spontaneity. No "source" is necessary, and the following somewhat parallel incident is offered merely as one proof the more of Mérimée's penetrating psychology.

Among the few who dared to defy Richelieu was Mme de Chevreuse. Her long struggle with him recalls Mme de Staël and Napoleon, but perhaps the heroine of the Fronde needed even greater courage, for the cardinal never hesitated to send his enemies to the scaffold. Among her fellow-conspirators was the marquis de Châteauneuf, who owed everything to Richelieu. He fell in love with Mme de Chevreuse, gave himself to her interests and resisted the efforts of the cardinal to spread dissension between them. Mme de Chevreuse was the soul of the opposition,—her arch-enemy called her a "chef de parti,"—and in one of her letters to Châteauneuf whose fidelity she wished to assure during a forced separation she wrote: "Je vous conseille, ne pouvant pas encore dire que je vous commande et ne voulant plus dire que je vous prie, de porter le diamant que je vous envoie, afin que voyant cette pierre, qui a deux qualités, l'une d'être ferme, l'autre si brillante qu'elle paraît de loin et fait voir les moindres défauts, vous vous souveniez qu'il faut être ferme dans vos promesses pour qu'elles me plaisent, et ne point faire de fautes pour que je n'en remarque point." (Quoted by V. Cousin, *Mme de Chevreuse*, p. 106.)

BENJ. M. WOODBRIDGE

University of Texas

SOME REMARKS ON THE "LOGICAL SUBJECT" *de* IN FRENCH¹

Editor MODERN LANGUAGE JOURNAL:

It is astonishing how little help can be gained from most of our French grammars on the subject of the infinitive construction. To be sure, the infinitive offers more difficulties than any other point in French grammar; but there are some constructions of the

¹ See Tobler—*Vermischte Beiträge*, Vol. I, p. 5: *de* ein "logisches Subjekt" einführend.

infinitive which are comparatively simple. Among these is the so-called "logical subject" infinitive.

An examination of twenty-five French grammars published in America reveals the following facts: Two are quite satisfactory in this matter of the logical subject infinitive; two are fairly successful in their attempts to explain the construction; three mention the construction, but fail to make it at all clear; while the rest are either silent or entirely misleading.

A common method of treating this subject is illustrated by the following quotations from three well-known texts: "After impersonal expressions consisting of the verb *to be* and an adjective, *de* precedes the following infinitive if the latter is the logical subject of the clause." "An adjective preceded by the impersonal verb *il est*, *il était*, etc., requires *de* before the next verb; as:—" "After *être*, used impersonally with a predicate adjective, *de* is necessary before a dependent infinitive." For example, in the sentence *Il est facile de faire cela*, the *de* would be accounted for by the fact that *être* is used impersonally and is followed by an adjective. As a matter of fact, neither *être* nor the adjective has anything whatever to do with the construction of the infinitive. Notice that when the adjective gives place to a noun, the construction is still the same (and by "construction" I do not mean merely the sign): *C'est un plaisir de faire cela*. Again, when *être* gives place to some other verb, the construction of the infinitive remains the same: *Cela m'amuse de faire cela*.

In each of the three sentences above, the construction of the infinitive is the same. In each case, the grammatical subject is meaningless, and the infinitive is the logical subject. *It is easy to do that* means *To do that is easy*; *It is a pleasure to do that* means *To do that is a pleasure*; *It amuses me to do that* means *To do that amuses me*. It will readily be recognized by the student that the subject (that about which something is said) is not clear until we come to the infinitive. The grammatical subject, whether it be *il*, *ce* or *cela*, simply anticipates the logical subject, which is the infinitive. It is comparatively easy to teach the student to recognize this construction of the infinitive: if he can invert the order of his sentence, making the infinitive the subject, without changing the statement, he is almost sure that the sign of the infinitive will be *de*. However, if the infinitive comes first, there is no sign, even if there is a redundant subject pronoun: *Travailler c'est le seul moyen d'arriver*. He must be sure, however, that the infinitive is not the grammatical subject.

It may be well to caution the student right at the beginning that the sign is not used after *falloir*:² *Il faut faire cela*. *It is*

² I should like here to raise a question as to the real meaning of the French verb *falloir*. We often lose sight of real values in translating, and I have often wondered

necessary to do that means *To do that is necessary*; yet there is no sign. Later it will be necessary to add that there is no sign after *valoir autant* or *valoir mieux*, or *faire* (used impersonally) followed by an adjective: *Il vaut autant ne pas aller*; *Il vaut mieux ne pas aller*; *Il fait cher vivre à Paris*.

The student of French grammar, having thoroughly mastered this construction of the infinitive, will not be astonished when he finds a logical subject *de* elsewhere: *Ce ne sera pas trop de toute ma vie pour réparer le mal que j'ai fait.* (Augier—*Le Gendre de M. Poirier*, end of Act III.) *Il suffira, païen qui crois nous avilir, De mon dernier regard pour te faire pâlir!* (Bornier—*La Fille de Roland*, ll. 1165 and 1166).

E. F. HACKER

Ohio State University

whether *it is necessary* adequately expresses the French *il faut*. In such cases as *Il le faut* and *Il me faut un livre*, for example, it seems to me that something like *It requires* would come nearer to the real meaning of the French. If this be true, the infinitive following *faillir* need not be construed as a logical subject.